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THE ROUND TABLE

BOWING DOWN BEFORE THE GOD OF PUNCTUATION

The story of the man—a Boston man, I think he was—who filled a page or two of his *magnus opus* with all sorts of punctuation marks and appended a note asking his readers to choose from the collection of commas, semicolons, exclamation points, and question marks just what was necessary to interpret the various sentences of the book has been often repeated in order to force upon our attention the senseless marking of our thought. Perhaps our superintendent had the tale in mind when he recently challenged his teachers to listen to his reading of a passage and punctuate it as each of us saw fit; "For," said he, "there is an absolute certainty that no two of you will 'point it off' alike." Or he may have been comparing the punctuation of some great master with that of another and observed how differently they strove to make clear their ideas—differently so far as punctuation was concerned. However he was guided, he made some of us pause to wonder whether there has not been too much *worship* and too little *spirit* in this matter of punctuation.

First, let us see what it is for anyhow. It is of comparatively recent origin—surely too recent to become imperious. Time was within the history of English Literature when not even words were divided from each other. We began punctuating to give the same sense to the eye that our spoken sentence gives to the ear. Naturally when one speaks he pauses from time to time, breaks off suddenly and begins again, or says something in an aside to explain a main proposition. To be sure, he either raises his voice or lets it fall at the end of a sentence. But since question marks, exclamation points, and periods trouble only the memory, I have nothing to say as to them. What I want to argue about is the question, How many points and what points shall I use to make my sentence clear?

Let us reduce it to the simplest terms. First, I shall not punctuate at all unless I am forced to do it by my sentence. Then I shall try to make clearer sentences instead of expecting to crawl out of a morass or tangle of circumstances by means of accurate "pointing off." To draft a list of rules to aid me in escaping detection while trying to commit high crimes in thinking seems unwise, to say the least.

Secondly, I shall use the comma for all purposes unless I *have* to use another point to give value to the comma or commas that have preceded it. For instance, I shall never punctuate the following sentence in any way but this: "He could not understand me, he could not therefore appreciate my feelings, he could not help me in my need." But if each of these members, or only one of them, becomes involved so that further punctuation becomes necessary I shall change the pointing, thus: "An Englishman of Englishmen, he could not understand me; he could not therefore appreciate my feelings; he could not help me in my need, much as he wanted to."

Thirdly, I shall use the dash to show interruption or break in the thought—never the comma. For an example, I shall say: "To fight, to bleed, to die—I am ready when the time comes"; or "He only—a man of the highest courage and principle—came to me."

On those three principles hang all my law and all my prophets when it comes to punctuating the sentence for thought-interpretation. I trust to be able to remember the necessity for a period or an exclamation point, or a question mark to mark the end of my sentence, or a colon when, in rare instances, I want to introduce a formal quotation or statement.

Now a class of high-school children—or rather of grade children—should be able to understand these principles without being troubled with rules of any kind. Can we not induce them to remember the exterior points, and to think so clearly that only an occasional comma will become necessary, and to see that, when the sentence *does* demand a semicolon, it is to be used, not as a thing possessing grace in itself, any more than baptism, but because without it some comma may not possess sufficient suggestive force, and to feel that a straight line often conveys an idea better than a sentence of explanatory matter? Or must we go on giving the pupils exercises in punctuating by rule and continue to wonder why they do not see that they are not punctuating with intelligence? As well try to make a Christian out of a church-goer without giving him an intelligent reason for his faith.

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AFTER THE SHOW

"Gentlemen," I said, as we strode sadly away from the Photoplay Palace, "if any sort of refreshment would be a comfort to you, according to the universal law of nations it is on me." Neither the big administrator nor the little Latinist answered; I gathered that my place in their